



LEO GENN, RALPH TRUMAN, PETER USTINOV
"An immense but often dull . . . historical mock-up"

Film Reviews, by P.J.W.

ROMAN SCANDALS, or No Spinach for Poppaea

QUO VADIS

(M.G.M.)

THERE is something anachronistic in this mammoth, tasteless extravaganza about the decline and approaching fall of the Roman Empire. Thirty or 40 years ago, when the original version of *Quo Vadis* appeared, based on Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel, film producers might have had the excuse that they knew no better. But today we expect a little quality as well as size, and this film is short on quality.

All that most of us remember of the Emperor Nero is that he fiddled while Rome burnt. *Quo Vadis* not only shows him plucking at his lyre and singing over the rooftops of the burning city, but explains why Rome was set on fire (at his orders) and how he later satisfied the people's desire for vengeance by slaughtering all the Christians he could lay hands on. Since the film runs for over two and a half hours there is a little more to it than this, but not much. There is a good deal of stilted

dialogue between Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor) and Lygia (Deborah Kerr), in which she tries to persuade him to give up his false gods for Christianity, and to convince him that killing is sinful and owning slaves undemocratic.

The real emphasis of the story, however, is on the wicked life and corrupt behaviour of Nero and his court. Here the film is lavish, colourful, and occasionally funny. The producer, Sam Zimbalist, and the director, Mervyn Leroy have excelled themselves in showing the corruption which results from absolute power, and Peter Ustinov, as the power-crazed dictator, gives the best performance in the film. His wild-eyed ranting makes Nero appear a ludicrous but dangerous madman, and this treatment is amusing enough to form a lively contrast with the muscle-bound banality of much of the rest of the film. He is ably assisted by Leo Genn in the role of Petronius, the cynical, witty confidant who eventually commits suicide in self-disgust, and Patricia Laffan as Nero's malicious wife, Poppaea.

Nevertheless, the film stands or falls on its spectacle, and in such scenes as

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